

## Criteria for New Park Units

Since its creation in 1916 with a single site at Mount Mitchell, the NC State Parks System has maintained a steady growth in the conservation of North Carolina's important lands. As population grows along with demand for outdoor recreation facilities the continued expansion of the NC State Parks System will continue. This expansion must be grounded in well-considered plans. Adding new units to the system should focus on preserving sites of statewide significance, on ensuring representative examples of the state's resources are protected and on providing state park services and facilities to areas of the state currently underserved.

The State Parks Act directs the system to include representative examples of North Carolina's archaeological, geological, biological, scenic and recreational resources. Under these categories, specific examples are considered themes. The existing system was evaluated for representation of these themes and themes not represented or well represented are priorities for additions. Distribution of state parks system recreation resources has also been assessed along with demand for recreational facilities and/or activities.

Enlarging the NC State Parks System is important, but potential new units must be selected carefully to make sure they fulfill the purposes of the system and that they justify the considerable public investment in acquisition and long-term management. The Division of Parks and Recreation develop criteria to evaluate potential new units. This provides a scoring system for potential new sites as well as a way to remove unsuitable sites for further consideration. Each of the following criteria generates a score for a site and those are combined as an overall score for each site.

Four minimum criteria are used for the initial evaluation of a site. A site that does not meet these basic requirements are removed from further consideration. The minimum criteria are:

- Statewide significance of resource themes represented.
- Size – sufficient acreage to protect principal resources and provide appropriate facilities with minimal impacts on those resources.

Land Protection/Acquisition

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- Absence of incompatible features such as roads, intrusive development, incompatible vistas and air, water and noise pollution.
- Sufficient access for management and public use.

If a site meets these basic criteria, then scores are assigned for each of these measured criteria:

- Number of high priority resource themes represented.
- Rarity of themes represented.
- Overall threats to themes.
- Degree of threat to resources/urgency of acquisition.
- Presence rare and/or endangered species.
- Interconnection with other protected areas.
- Quality of resources and/or presence of a superlative (biggest, best example, unique, etc.)
- Regional demand for parks system units staffed and open to the public.
- Suitability for providing high quality recreation.

While the scoring system is a valuable tool to evaluate sites, it alone cannot be used to decide to add the site to the state parks system. Scoring is only one component of any decision to pursue acquisition. Other factors are:

- Availability of funding through state conservation trust funds or in partnership with local or statewide land trust organizations.
- The potential of the site to qualify for special funding such as the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grants or wetland mitigation program grants.
- Local support for a state parks system unit.
- Further site research that identifies extremely rare or additional resources themes.